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Lawyer: Poor Lacking Legal Aid; The New Head of the American Bar Association Calls the Dearth of Help for Low-Income Americans a "Travesty."

Mike Fuchs Staff Writer

Poor Americans are not getting the legal help they need, the president-elect of the American Bar Association told lawyers Tuesday in Greensboro.

"In a two-year period, the average American family needs legal services once or twice," said Alfred P. Carlton Jr., a Greensboro native who will take office in August. "Half of them go unrepresented, which is a travesty."

The Raleigh lawyer delivered his remarks during the Greensboro Bar Association's annual luncheon.

In his 20-minute remarks, Carlton described providing legal services to low-income Americans as one of the biggest challenges facing the legal profession.

But it's not that there's a shortfall of lawyers. Carlton pointed out there are twice as many lawyers on a per capita basis than when he started practicing law 25 years ago.

"The conundrum is the American public is being underrepresented," he said.

Part of the solution, said Carlton, is maintaining funding for the Legal Services Corp., a private, nonprofit group that Congress established in 1974 that provides legal aid to low-income people in civil matters.

For the second consecutive year, President Bush in February supported Legal Services' funding request by asking Congress to give the group \$329.3 million under his budget proposal for next year.

That request matches Legal Services' current annual spending plan.

Legal Services provides grants to 179 local programs serving every county and congressional district in the United States.

In 2000, Legal Services-funded offices handled more than 1 million civil cases. More than two-thirds of the group's clients are women, most of them mothers.

Tuesday's conference at the Marriott in downtown Greensboro was attended by more than 100 people, including former state Supreme Court Chief Justice Henry Frye, District Court Judges A. Robinson Hassell and Joseph E. Turner, District Attorney Stuart Albright and students from area high schools and colleges.